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Next-Door Neighbors

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we rode a toy train among life-size replicas
of brontosaurus and triceratops.

In winter the bean field behind our house
would freeze over, and I'd skate across it
alone late evenings, sometimes tripping
over stubble frozen above the ice.
In spring the fields turned up arrowheads, bones.
Those slow-plowing glaciers left it clean and flat here,
scraping away or pushing underground what was before them.

NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS

Grant Street was one long Sunday afternoon
in February or March, a few yards of brown grass
thinning and matted or rubbed away hard.
Our house stayed dark with my mother's pleurisy,
and it made me angry, the way she kept trying
to raise herself up to clean rooms or fix supper.
Then she'd lie down again on the couch, covering
herself tight with two blankets, chilling.
It was Sunday afternoon, foggy, and my father
was playing his Hank Williams record.
He's dozing at the end of the couch, his hand
on my mother's feet, and I go outside to sit
on the porch. Mr. Carter from across the street
pulls up grinning on his Harley and asks me
if I want to take a ride, and I do, but I don't
like his eyes, and besides I'm not allowed to,
and shake my head no. I'm ten or eleven
with a younger brother and sister somewhere,
but my seeing is short-ranged and telescoped—
cardboard taped into the Carters' front window,
the busted taillight on our old white Comet,
yesterday's *Register*, "The World At Your Doorstep."

Mrs. Carter appears in the broken-paned window,
another black eye, and pulls down the blind.
My mother had called Mrs. Carter to ask if
she'd come over and blow cigarette smoke into her ears,
she'd read somewhere that it helped.
But Mrs. Carter said sorry, she couldn't leave the house.
I'd yelled at my mother then why didn't she go
to a doctor, I slammed the door and was sorry.
Now I'm sitting on the step, biting the polish
off my nails. I don't like my coat, it's reversible
and has imitation fur. The snow edging the empty street
looks like coal. Next year Mr. Carter will go

to the electric chair for killing an old man
and his wife and hiding their pieces in his car trunk.
One night I'll forget to kiss my father goodbye
before he drives off to the factory with just one
taillight working, and I'll shudder to sleep seeing that,
certain he'll die. I pray for goodness
and mercy every night, I want too many things.

DREAM NEAR EXTINCTION

I'm sitting in the gravel road that leads
to my grandmother's, moving my bare feet
in a basin of dust soft as talc.

It's late afternoon. The wind is slow and laced
with the tar my grandmother is cooking, stirring
in a rusted barrel down by the house.

The tough grass clumped along the road
has dried stiff and sharp as razor blades.
A milk snake bellies through it blind.